THE LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA

1900–1905

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Introduction

It is now generally accepted that the Liberation Movement (referred to from the beginning as the 'Liberal Movement'[1]), which emerged in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, played a very important role in the political events which culminated in the First Russian Revolution (of 1905). But little has been known until now about the origins, composition, organizational framework and significance of the 'liberalism' of this movement.

The emergence of the Liberation Movement coincided with the establishment of the other two main oppositional forces in tsarist Russia – the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party, or RSDRP (*Rossiyskaya Sotsial-Demokraticheskaya Rabochaya Partiya*), and the party of Socialist Revolutionaries, or SR. All three were, to a large extent, a by-product of the dichotomy which characterized the policies of the autocratic regime during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth century. On the one hand it conducted a dynamic economic policy, the aim of which was the rapid industrialization of Russia, and, on the other, it displayed an ultra-conservative attitude towards social and political questions.

Russian autocracy was a more arbitrary and oppressive regime than any of the absolutist states of the West had ever been.[2] It became even more despotic in the period 1881–1904. All sections of the population, except to some extent the nobility, were denied personal freedom and political rights. Freedom of speech, of the press and of conscience were non-existent. Discrimination against minorities was intensified and transformed into the official policy known as 'russification'. The urban working class created in the wake of industrialization, was denied the right to form trade unions and/or to strike. The legal status of the peasants, who still constituted the bulk of the population, was inferior

[1] See, for example, *Osvobozhdeniye* (1902), no. 1, pp. 5, 7, 10.

[2] For a very brief illuminating description of the peculiar features of autocracy see *Schapiro*, pp. 7–9.

even to that of the town dwellers with their meagre rights, and furthermore the peasants were forced to shoulder the main burden of the industrialization drive. But it was the intelligentsia[1] which more than any other section of the population resented and rebelled against the tsarist despotism. The dynamic economic policy of the government provided this class, for the first time in Russian history, with potential mass support for its struggle against autocracy.

It was the prospect of at long last gaining the support of the peasantry which encouraged those intellectuals who belonged to the Populist* camp to establish the SR Party. At the same time, the inability of the workers to redress their legitimate grievances within the legal framework of autocracy provided the Marxists with a powerful incentive for the establishment of the RSDRP. Though the two parties differed profoundly on questions of ideology and tactics, they had two things in common: first, they both believed that ultimately autocracy could only be destroyed through the use of violence; secondly, that at least in theory, political freedom was, for both, only a means of achieving social equality.

During the formative period of these two parties a sizeable group of radical intellectuals began for the first time since the Decembrists,[2] to regard political freedom not only as a means but also as an end in itself. The members of this group came from both the Populist and Marxist camps. The former rallied round the editorial board of *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth) and were known as 'Legal Populists'. The latter became known, at the turn of the century, as 'Economists' and 'Legal Marxists'.† In addition to their belief in political freedom as an aim in its own right, these people shared two other assumptions. They believed that the use of violence was not the sole means by which autocracy could be overthrown. (Hence the nickname 'legal', employed by their revolutionary critics, the word standing not for legal oppositional activity, which was then an impossibility, but for their readiness to rely mainly on non-violent means.) Secondly, they were temporarily disillusioned with the masses, i.e. the peasants and the industrial workers, and were seeking allies in other strata of the population. These

[1] For the origins of this term see *Seton-Watson*, p. 225.

* The term 'populism' is employed by the author in the traditional sense. For a reappraisal of this term see *Pipes* II*a*, pp. 29–30, 84–6, and below.

[2] The most detailed account in English of the Decembrists is found in *Mazour*. See also *Raeff* IV and *Schapiro*, pp. 23–38.

† The term 'Legal Marxism' was apparently coined, by Lenin, immediately after his break with Struve, i.e. not before the end of 1900. It was used by him and by his Marxist-orthodox allies in a derogatory sense. (See Pipes II, pp. 74n.–75n. and Pipes II*a*, p. 124.)

allies were discovered not in the ranks of the rising bourgeoisie, as might have been expected on the basis of developments in Western and Central Europe, but among those nobles who were active in the elective local government institutions (zemstvos). And it was with the aid of these nobles (hereafter referred to as zemstvo radicals) that the Liberation Movement was launched.

This partnership constituted one of the distinguishing features of the Russian 'Liberal Movement'. The other was the political and social programme of its leaders which, by the beginning of 1905, had also become that of the majority of its rank-and-file members and supporters. It was not 'liberal' in the sense that the programmes of liberal parties and groups in nineteenth-century Western and Central Europe were. The co-ordinating centre of the Liberation Movement (the Union of Liberation) was not interested in partial reforms (such as individual freedoms, the rule of law and the establishment of a representative legislative assembly, elected by a restricted franchise) guaranteed by a constitution granted from above. What it aimed at was the destruction of autocracy by pressure exerted from below and its replacement by a fully democratic regime and what is now known as a 'welfare state'. The Liberation Movement was, therefore, radical–democratic in character, and on practical questions (as distinct from final objectives) it differed from its revolutionary contemporaries mainly as regards means. Even this difference was almost totally eradicated at the beginning of 1905.

The first two chapters of this book describe in detail the beginnings of zemstvo radicalism, the economic and political reasons for the emergence of an oppositional movement among the zemstvo nobility at large, and the growing influence of the former in this movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Chapters 3 and 4 trace the origins of the democratically inclined intelligentsia. Part One of the book should, therefore, be regarded as a lengthy introduction, placing the Liberation Movement in historical perspective. Part Two describes the actual process by which the Liberation Movement came into being, the organizational framework which enabled the radicals to dominate it and its offensive against the autocratic government. Part Three brings the story to its unhappy conclusion. It starts by describing the stages by which the Liberation Movement achieved supremacy among the forces struggling against autocracy, and ends with the Movement's disintegration without having achieved its main aim – the replacement of autocracy by a constitutional–democratic regime.